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Mark Lawson on: Frederick Forsyth's spooky scenarios • Spiffing images • Special bonds

Phantom of the Commons

Last year, Frederick Forsyth announced his retirement from writing fiction. However, like many of those who retire, Freddie seems to be having trouble letting go. It was announced recently that he is collaborating with Andrew Lloyd-Webber on a sequel to The Phantom Of The Opera; presumably the scarred central character will adopt a new identity and try to assassinate the French president.

And, his interest in fiction apparently revived by working on this libretto, Forsyth offered in this week's Sunday Telegraph a nightmare scenario for a contemporary story set in Britain: "Suppose a young Prime Minister came to power with a huge majority: suppose that behind an exterior of limitless personal charm he nursed a ruthless desire for untrammelled and perpetual power, what would such a man have to do to achieve his ends?"

Most publishers would offer a seven-figure cheque for a thriller along these lines, called something like The Devil's Alternative or The Fourth Protocol, if the novelist had not already used them. Forsyth, though, is not offering this plot as fiction but as fact. He seriously believes that Tony Blair is beginning to move towards an "elective dictatorship" in Britain.

The retired thriller-writer outlines seven steps which the politician in his "Suppose a young Prime Minister" scenario would have to take in order to subvert democracy. They include "trivialise the House of Commons . . . marginalise the Civil Service . . . manipulate the media . . . break up the United Kingdom". By this stage, the reader — well schooled in the genre of "faction" — realises that the nice smiling Mr Blair has done all of these things. Behind his grin and all that guff about asking his children at breakfast for their favourite poems, the architect of New Labour is secretly becoming a dictator.

It should perhaps be said at this point that this is not the first time that Forsyth has engaged in political speculation. In his novel The Fourth Protocol, published in the early eighties, the Soviet government, assisted by the traitor Kim Philby, constructs a plot to make Ken Livingstone (Forsyth uses real names in his novels) the British prime minister.

Having got his last Downing Street "nightmare scenario" wrong to the extent that Livingstone was increasingly marginalised in a Labour Party moving ever to the right, you might think that Forsyth should keep quiet. But instead he merely reverses his nightmare and posits a rightwing Labour leader as the new route to tyranny in Britain.

It's a pity, though, that Forsyth has retired from fiction because his supposedly factual piece this week showed the thriller-writer's instincts still intact. The way he wrote about current political players kept bringing to mind a scriptwriter's pitch. Who, for example, was the shadowy villain behind the break-up of the United Kingdom? Forsyth explains. "Lord Jenkins of Hillhead is at work."

And who would be the heroic protagonist battling to prevent the rise of Blair's dictatorship? Here, again, Forsyth goes into perfect pitch mode: "Speaker Betty Boothroyd's antennae are not so blunt that she is unaware what is going on and why."

You can already see the movie: a padded Ian Richardson as the evil Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, Judi Dench as the plucky Betty Boothroyd who has 24 hours to save Britain from dictatorship. Forsyth may claim he has given up fiction but let us be the judge of that. Perhaps he should suggest to Lord Lloyd-Webber that the hero in Phantom II, following stunningly successful plastic surgery in the sewers of Paris, suddenly emerges as the Prime Minister of Great Britain.

Return of the Phantom . . . and is Blair masking a plan to get Britannia in a tyrant's grip?

Phantom of the Commons

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